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ABSTRACT

This speech discusses the role of community colleges in meeting three huge challenges to North Carolina in the immediate future: (1) responding to demand for dramatic improvements in the public schools; (2) finding effective, affordable ways to educate the echo boomers; and (3) helping create a workforce that can cope with the continuing reality of change in the workplace. This potential growth is a challenge, but can also be a tremendous opportunity. Economic change must start off in the workforce with better skills than those of decades ago, and those skills must improve every day just to keep up. North Carolina community colleges must support an economic future for all North Carolinians. Ensuring that North Carolina's citizens have the skills to participate in the information technology economy is the most important challenge that the State faces in the coming years. The real challenge is in rethinking partnerships through which instruction is delivered at every stage of the learning process. However, technology skill must not replace the emphasis on fundamental education. College leaders must "think globally, act locally." (VWC)

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Speech to the North Carolina Association of Community College Trustees Law Conference Sunday, February 7, 1999

H. Martin Lancaster
North Carolina Community College System

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

H. MARTIN LANCASTER

NORTH CAROLINA ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES

LAW CONFERENCE

SHERATON IMPERIAL, RTP

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1999

Thank you for inviting me to share your evening. I continue to be impressed by your willingness to volunteer your talents for the benefit of the more than 700,000 students who come to our campuses each year seeking better lives.

Helen Dowdy, your executive director, told me I could talk about anything I wanted to this evening. She said that, secure in the knowledge that your program tomorrow includes detailed presentations on legislative and budget updates; on the reorganization of our statewide foundation; and on a number of other hot issues of statewide importance. Thus, I would like to spend my time sharing my thoughts on the role of the community colleges in meeting three huge challenges to North Carolina in the immediate future.

The first is responding to demand for dramatic improvements in the public schools. The second is finding effective, affordable ways to educate the echo boomers. The third is the overwhelming need to create a workforce that can cope with the continuing reality of change in the workplace.

If you heard Governor Hunt's State of the State address this past Monday night, you know that he dedicated the speech -- his last State of the State -- to a challenge to make North Carolina's public schools the best in the country. It is a sure bet that he will dedicate his budget and his legislative efforts to the same praiseworthy goal. Certainly all of us in community colleges will continue to press hard for needs of adult learners and

work to educate the Governor and members of the General Assembly to the critical financial needs of our system independent of our relationship with public schools. However, you as trustees and we as state officials must be aware of the enormous impact that changes in public schools are likely to have on our colleges.

The State Board of Education has just voted to end social promotion, to continue to raise standards and to work toward an "exit exam" for high school graduates. The upside of these ideas is that, if they work, they will produce better-educated, more disciplined graduates. The downside, whether they work or not, is that there are likely to be a startling number of students who can't move up, won't graduate and will drop out. Where will they go? Experience tells us that many already come to community colleges. Logic tells us that many more may be on their way. Do we have the staff, facilities and programs for them?

Another piece of the performance picture is the call for "no remediation." The University is under powerful pressure to get out of the remediation business. If they don't do remediation, guess who will! The State Board of Education is considering ideas to develop a high-school diploma that carries a guarantee of "no remediation." Community colleges know just about all there is to know about remediation. Many of your colleges provide services to the University under contract. With open-door policies, all community colleges must be prepared to provide it routinely. How do we know who needs it and for what? Well, we find out; we test our students with nationally-developed instruments and place them in courses where they can succeed and more on to the next challenge. I am concerned, however, about what might happen if a student arrives at a community college with a "no remediation" guarantee in hand and does miserably on the

assessment test. Do we send him back to high school? Do we accept the diploma, no questions asked, and suffer with him when he drowns?

Don't misunderstand me. I am the first to say that it would be great to know that every student who graduates from high school has mastered skills needed to move to the next educational level or into the workplace. But I think it is critical, right now, that we sort out the real impacts of these policies, particularly at the local level. I know that many of you hold your seats through appointment by you local school boards. If you are not working through these issues now, I urge you to start the conversation as soon as possible. It's one thing to sit at a State Board of Education or Community Colleges Board meeting and puzzle over statistics and policies and long-term goals. It's another to face real students and real parents day-to-day.

And speaking of students. If you have visited public or private K-12 schools lately, you know North Carolina has a LOT of them, as people flock to our state and the children of the baby boomers move through the system. Remember how we thought we would never have another population surge like the boom that followed World War il? Well, we were wrong. Baby boomers might be late parents, but they are making up for lost time with the huge generation now called the "echo boomers."

Several years ago, members of the General Assembly began to prod the University and Community Colleges to make plans to provide for the college education of this generation during the next 10-15 years. You may know that University of North Carolina President Molly Broad is aggressively pursuing funding and other strategies to accommodate an anticipated 50,000 new students. There is strong sentiment in the General Assembly and in parts of the University that community colleges can and

should handle the first two years for many of those students. Chancellors Michael Hooker at Chapel Hill and Frank Borkowski at Appalachian have been particularly vocal on the advantages of that approach. Our change to the semester system and development of the comprehensive transfer agreement with the University have made this suggestion a natural solution.

We have stepped up other efforts, too. This fall, for example, the system vice presidents and I participated in workshops hosted on University campuses for high school counselors. It was a terrific chance to plant the idea of community college education as the best choice for all kinds of students, technical, vocational and college transfer.

This potential growth is a challenge, but it can be a tremendous opportunity, provided all of us work together to answer some critical questions. Should we remain focused on technology and vocational training with college transfer being a minor collateral mission, or should we more aggressively pursue a role in providing the first two years of college? In my opinion, we are going to get many of these students whether we go after them or not. How do we accomodate this growth without diminishing our first commitment to technical and vocational education? If our colleges assume greater responsibility for college education, will there be a change in the respective obligations of the state and local governments for facilities and if so, what? Furthermore, how do we determine student demand and facility needs to meet them? The State Board and System Office staff are wrestling with these issues now; successful solutions will only come with the real-world participation of community college trustees, presidents, faculties and staffs. Your input is critical.

And we must find solutions, because we know that in the world of today and tomorrow, a high-school education is not enough. Economic change dictates that we must start off in the workforce with better skills than those of decades ago and that we must improve those skills every day just to keep up.

Community college folks are used to hearing and talking about economic change. After all, our colleges were founded to help move our economy and our citizens from farms to factories and then from traditional industrial jobs to high technology jobs. We remain good enough at this that North Carolina was ranked last fall as having the number one worker training program in the nation by Expansion Management magazine. Our principal competitors in economic development, South Carolina and Georgia, finished second and third respectively. As an indication of just how busy we are in this field, 18 new projects have begun since December 1, and we are almost certain to run out of money well before the end of the fiscal year.

So much of the news about economic change in our state is good. Unemployment is low, high-tech is booming, and home-grown companies like Quintiles, SAS and Bank of America are among the world's biggest and best. However, proud old companies that helped build today's prosperity continue to hemorrhage as basic industry moves offshore. The massive layoffs at Burlington Industries are terrible blows to whole towns defined by life in the mill. Our community colleges are essential players in the state's effort to retrain those thousands of hard-working, dedicated adults who deserve a chance to be part of the high-tech future.

I urge you to pay particular attention also to the special needs of tobacco farmers affected by the changes occuring in the tobacco economy and by the tobacco settlement.

Our state has already seen the migration of farmworkers to the factory floor. This challenge is, I think, quite different. These are the men and women who own the farms -- they are essentially entrepreneurs, business people accustomed to working for themselves. How should we meet their needs to find new, satisfying ways to support their families? There will be significant resources allocated from the tobacco settlement to deal with problems of tobacco farm families and communities and new strategies for addressing the health concerns caused by tobacco use. What should our role be in the economic development of communities hard hit by lost quota and lost jobs? Since we train a majority of allied health workers and since these are among our most expensive programs, should funds from the settlement help us with these costs? I have asked David Sullivan on my staff to put together a team to work on these issues. We urgently solicit your ideas and concerns.

Can our community colleges support an economic future for all North Carolinians that is as bright as the present is for so many of us? Yes, if we continue to pay attention to what growing industries are telling us about their need for skilled workers, especially in information technology...that means computers to most of us. Let me share with you some statistics from the Information Technology Association of America's recent report "Help Wanted: The IT Workforce Gap At the Dawn of a New Century":"

Sixty-eight percent of Information Technology companies cite a lack of skilled/trained workers as a barrier to their companies' ability to grow. Education will be a key facet of any solution to this problem. However, universities are not doing an adequate job currently in graduating students in sufficient numbers. From 1986 to 1994, the number of

bachelor degrees in computer science awarded annually at U.S. universities fell by 43 percent. Sixty-nine percent of IT companies say only "few" or "some" of the applicants for their IT jobs possess the skills the companies are seeking."

We believe that the community college system is uniquely situated and committed to filling the gaps. Ensuring that North Carolina's citizens have the skills to participate in the information technology economy is the most important challenge that our state will face in the coming years. Studies indicate that people with an associate's degree or higher are nearly six times more likely to use computers on the job than are those who drop out before high school, and people who use computers at their work typically earn 10 to 15 percent higher wages, all other factors being even.

In 1984, only 25 percent of Americans used computers at work. By 1993 the number had grown to 47 percent. By the year 2000, close to 90% of all jobs will require some use of the computer. The skill is as basic as knowing how to read --or to drive, as I have discovered. Five years ago, I didn't know how to turn on a computer. Today, I communicate with our Presidents across the state and the staff members next door by just a few key strokes on my computer and do so countless times each day. My experience is just one small piece of evidence that none of us can afford to stop learning. We must erase the concept of a "completed" education. The simple truth is that employees at any level, at any task will not "master" one skill, software program, or machine before the next one arrives.

Can we possibly keep our instructional equipment current? How can we ensure that our instructors have current skills and software? With more resources, we can make progress. However, the real challenge is in rethinking partnerships through which we deliver the instruction at every stage of the learning process. Fortunately, many creative people are meeting that challenge in our community colleges.

Wake Technical Community College is working with Cisco Systems' Internetworking Academy Program to train individuals for positions in the internetworking. Wake Tech also has a creative partnership with Nortel which gives them full access to 71 of Nortel's labs when they are not in use by Nortel for instructional use. Not only does this save Wake Tech hundreds of thousands of dollars, but students are learning on state-of-the-art equipment that they will use on the job.

At Durham Technical Community College, The Novell Education Academic Partnership has trained certified Novell network engineers and instructors and has 300 students enrolled in the program just this year. Graduates are able to move into high-paying jobs, and those already employed are able to be promoted. However, Durham Tech is challenged to hire and retain qualified faculty. An investment of $10,000 to $15,000 in training for one instructor has been required, and that individual is now highly marketable and can command a much higher salary than the college can afford to pay.

Across the system, our salaries are so low that many of our recent graduates start out making more than the salaries of their instructors. How can we continue to provide quality instruction when our salaries are dead last in the southeast and ahead only of South Dakota nationwide?

As we grapple with the daunting expense and intellectual challenge of technology, we need to remember that machines and software are simply the tools that we employ in today's workplace. Being able to manipulate modern technology is crucial to employability and must be incorporated into all of our curricula. However, technology skill must not replace the emphasis on fundamental education that has always been a hallmark of our system. If it does, we run the risk of simply reducing our students' capabilities to nothing more than machine operators, destined to obsolescence with the next generation of technology.

Let me close with a fashionable phrase of recent years: "think globally, act locally." We can all participate in the broad vision, but you have the privilege of taking that local action. I value every day our partnership for the benefit of North Carolina, and I look forward to all the work that awaits us in the coming year. The greatest challenge we face in the next few months is to help the Legislature understand these needs and our role in meeting them. Meeting these needs will require a lot of money for faculty salaries, technology support, equipment and facilities. You are our valued partners. You must do your part in making the case. We're counting on you as we always do. Thank you...